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ABSTRACT

A number of procedures were used to evaluate the effectiveness of the "Helping Hand," a free monthly newsletter published by the Barbour County (Alabama) Extension Service, with a circulation of 1,000. Seven criteria were established using related literature and advice from extension service professionals. A questionnaire and a cover letter were developed and validated by a formative committee, field-tested for readability, and mailed to 100 of the newsletter's recipients. After telephone follow-up, 61 responses were collected. The results revealed that 95 percent of the clientele read almost all of the newsletter, 61 percent would be disappointed if the newsletter failed to arrive, and 33 percent would notice its absence. Most respondents indicated that they always found the newsletter useful, reliable, and timely. The also indicated that the newsletter was easy to understand, and 80 percent would like to receive it monthly. The study concluded that the newsletter is an effective method of reaching individuals who do not have time to take courses, attend meetings, or read books. A follow-up survey was recommended. (The report contains 18 references and 5 appendixes that include the criteria of the survey, the formative committee, the questionnaire, the cover letter, and a copy of the newsletter.) (KC)

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ED 407 599

AN EVALUATION OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE HELPING HAND NEWSLETTER IN BARBOUR COUNTY, ALABAMA

Human Resources Development

Habiba N. Shaw

Alabama Cooperative Extension System

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A practicum report presented to Programs for Higher Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education

Nova Southeastern University

February, 1996

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Abstract of a practicum report presented to Nova Southeastern University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education

AN EVALUATION OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE HELPING HAND NEWSLETTER IN BARBOUR COUNTY, ALABAMA

By

Habiba N. Shaw

February, 1996

The Barbour County Extension Service is a public-funded, informal, education network that links Auburn University's knowledge base in agriculture, home economics, and community development to the people and communities of Barbour County.

Helping Hand is a free monthly newsletter that reaches one thousand clientele in Barbour County, Alabama. The problem was that no determination of the readers' utilization of the newsletter had been done. The purpose of the study was to evaluate the effectiveness of the Helping Hand. The three research questions for the study addressed the appropriate and valid criteria, questions, and format for this survey.

An evaluation methodology was used. Eight procedures were executed. Seven criteria were established by reviewing related literature and advice from three extension service professionals. A questionnaire and a cover letter were developed and validated

by a formative committee. The questionnaires and the cover letter were field-tested to assure readability.

The mail-out package consisted of the questionnaire, a cover letter, a pre-addressed, postage-paid return envelope, and a copy of Helping Hand. The packages were mailed August 16, 1995. Due to a low response rate, follow-up telephone calls and home visits were made to encourage more responses. Data from sixty-one respondents were collected. The results revealed that 95% of the clientele read almost all of the newsletter. Sixty-one percent indicated that they would be disappointed if the newsletter failed to arrive, and 33% would notice its absence. Respondents were asked to rate the Helping Hand in terms of its usefulness, reliability, and timeliness of information on a Likert scale. A vast majority of the respondents indicated that they always found the newsletter useful, reliable, and timely. They also indicated that the newsletter was easy to understand, and 80% would like to receive the newsletter monthly.

It was concluded that the newsletter is an effective method of reaching individuals who do not have time to take courses, attend meetings, or read books.

Recommendations included that Barbour County Extension Service should continue publishing the Helping Hand and conduct a follow-up survey.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

The Barbour County Extension Service (BCES) is a statewide continuing education network that links Auburn University's knowledge base in agriculture, home economics, and community development to the people of Barbour County. Extension education is a process of working with people to help them gain and apply knowledge, solve their problems, and improve the quality of their lives. Extension education programs are an off-campus, informal (noncredit) educational effort guided by specific objectives and including activities and events that are planned, conducted, and evaluated for their impact on participants' learning needs. The extension's educational activities include meetings, field days, workshops, consultations, media programs, presentations, discussions, correspondence courses, and newsletters.

Helping Hand is a free monthly newsletter that reaches one thousand clientele in Barbour County, Alabama. The County Extension Home Economist has been using this newsletter to disseminate research-based nutrition information since 1983.

Nature of the Problem

For several years preceding this study, federal funding for extension programs had been reduced. As a result, county extension offices were being asked to evaluate programs and set priorities for their clients' needs. Extension educators had to

deliver information more efficiently than ever before. Substantial time, effort, and a cost of $4,488.00 annually were expended by the extension staff in preparation of the newsletter. The problem was that no determination of the readers' utilization of the newsletter has been done.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of the Helping Hand newsletter. Specifically, the objectives of this study were as follows:

1. To ascertain readers' use of the Helping Hand;
2. To ascertain readers' opinions of the format, appearance, and content of the Helping Hand;
3. To identify recipients who no longer wished to receive the Helping Hand.

Significance to the Institution

A major challenge confronting the extension system is that of determining the impact of its programming efforts in bringing about clients' behavioral change and a substantial improvement in the quality of life of its public. This evaluation assisted BCES in reaching decisions on the future direction, design, and funding of the newsletter and whether its publication should be terminated, altered, or maintained.

Relationship to Seminar

Human Resources Development (HRD) is concerned with learning strategies that continuously improve the performance of the

organization's human resources, both individually and in groups. The study of HRD involves learning about effective approaches to strategic human resource planning, alternative methods for improving performance, technological transfer of learning, evaluation, and the return on investment to the organization from such activities (Baskett, Carnes, Groff and Sample, 1994, p. 7). The evaluation process of this study followed these principles of the HRD seminar.

Research Questions

There were three research questions for this study:

1. What are the valid and appropriate criteria to evaluate the newsletter?

2. What are the valid and appropriate questions to measure the readers' attitudes, the usefulness of the newsletter, and the suitability of the newsletter contents?

3. What is the valid and appropriate format for the survey?

Definition of Terms

The following terms are defined to add clarity to this study.

Checklist item. A checklist item is simply a method of providing the respondent a number of options from which to choose.

Clientele. The clientele are the people who plan and participate in the extension's educational programs.

Closed-ended questions. Closed-ended questions (also called

structured questions) are best for obtaining information and data that can be categorized easily (McMillan and Schumacher, 1993, p. 243).

Descriptive research. Descriptive research describes systematically the facts and characteristics of a given population or area of interest, factually and accurately (Issac and Michael, 1995, p. 50).

Double-barrelled questions. Double-barrelled questions contain two or more ideas, and frequently the word "and" is used in the term. Double-barrelled questions and statements are undesirable because the respondent may, if given an opportunity, answer each part differently (McMillan and Schumacher, 1993, p. 240).

Likert scale. A true Likert scale is one in which the stem includes a value or direction and the respondent indicates agreement or disagreement with the statement (McMillian and Schumacher, 1993, p. 244).

Newsletter. A newsletter is a publication that provides specific information directly to specific clientele, including information on the latest research developments, including results, innovations, and techniques that are relevant to the clientele.

Chapter 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of the Helping Hand newsletter. The literature review mainly examined the readership research that used a descriptive survey design in the form of a self-administered, mailed questionnaire. The factors relative to the evaluation were identified and reviewed. These factors included: (a) appropriate criteria for the evaluation, (b) appropriate questions to measure readership patterns and reasons for reading the newsletter, and (c) the establishment of appropriate format for the survey.

Readership Surveys

In 1992, Suvedi and Johnson conducted a readership survey to get feedback on the Communicator, a monthly newsletter of the Michigan State University Extension Service. The objectives of the study were to ascertain readers' utilization of the publication and their perceptions about the format, appearance, and major stories in the newsletter. The study used a descriptive survey sent through the U.S. mail. The data collection instrument was a self-administered questionnaire. The results indicated that the majority of the respondents preferred to receive a monthly printed newsletter (pp. 1-20).

A readership survey of the Messenger, another newsletter from the Michigan Agricultural Experiment Station (MAES), was conducted by Suvedi et al. (1993). The primary objective of that

survey was to get responses from newsletter readers in order to improve and strengthen internal communication between MAES staff members on policies and programs. This study also used a descriptive survey in the form of a mailed questionnaire. Overall, respondents indicated that they preferred to receive information through newsletters (pp. 1-12)

By using a simple, inexpensive, but carefully designed postcard survey, Smith and Kiernan (1992) evaluated The Woodlander, a monthly newsletter from the Cooperative Extension Service of Penn State University. A postcard containing four questions was sent to 10% of the 1500 recipients to measure the effectiveness of the newsletter. Because a substantial majority of the respondents indicated that they almost always read all of the newsletter, the agent decided to continue the newsletter in its current format and style (p. 31).

Young families in Pondera County, Montana, improved their resource management skills by the Getting it Together newsletter series. This newsletter was a pilot project; therefore, two sets of evaluation approaches were used. The first evaluation was based on the interaction sheet included with each newsletter. The second approach was a five-page questionnaire sent to all its participants. The evaluations revealed that respondents had improved their resource management skills through the newsletter and that they would prefer to receive similar newsletters from

the extension system (Goetting and Pourroy, 1991, pp. 17-19).

Ludwig (1988) reports a survey of a newsletter titled Single-Parent News, developed by the Ohio Cooperative Extension Service. The newsletter had been used by agencies as a teaching tool, posted on bulletin boards, and requested by many single parents. Parents were asked to give their reactions to the newsletter in addition to the questionnaire data. The survey indicated that the newsletter was an effective tool for reaching single-parent families with needed information in a form very usable to them and at a convenient time (p. 23).

Extension agents in two Maryland counties evaluated the Triple E News: Eat, Exercise, Extend Your Life, a monthly newsletter for the difficult-to-reach senior citizens in isolated parts of the community. A descriptive survey was designed to test the feasibility of the newsletter. The data collection instrument was a self-administered questionnaire.

The evaluation indicated that most of the seniors were interested in good nutrition and physical fitness. They shared newsletters with friends and neighbors and looked forward to recipes for small servings. When newsletters were late, agents would get eager calls about their newsletters (Frazier, Collins, and Rhodes 1991, pp. 34-35).

A team of six Cooperative Extension family life specialists conducted a national survey of the use of Age-paced parent education newsletters by extension programs. Information was

collected by a questionnaire sent to the extension family life specialist responsible for parent education in each state. Specialists from 19 states reported use of the Age-paced parent education newsletters.

Three of the states in the survey were selected to furnish evaluation data from parents who had received their Age-paced newsletters. In those states, over 95% said that the newsletter had helped them learn more about infant growth; over 65% said that it helped them relate to their baby; and 73% said that it improved their self-confidence as a parent. More than 50% said that it helped them care more effectively for their own needs (Nelson and Cudaback, 1985, pp. 13-14).

In an attempt to understand the factors that influence the use of computers to access agricultural information databases, Schumacher (1989) surveyed the subscribers of Doane's Agricultural Newsletter regarding their usage patterns. Cover letters and questionnaires were sent to all 5,000 subscribers. By collecting data from 391 respondents, the researcher was able to ascertain some of the difficulties of using "AgLine" and other information databases. As a result of the survey, the author recommends an educational focus to enhance future use of these agricultural information services (pp. 131-137).

Piovane (1995) conducted a survey to evaluate the quality of the Kutztown University's alumni publication, The Tower, through a readership survey. The evaluation process was developed using

a modified version of Dillman's total design method (the process includes a personalized cover letter, an attractive, simple to complete survey, and at least two follow-up contacts). The survey yielded a 32% response rate. Due to the low response, accurate generalizations about the larger alumni population and their opinions could not be made. The vast majority of the respondents perceived the Tower to be a quality publication (pp. 57-66).

Pavlik, Vastyan, and Maher (1990) examined why employees read Vital Signs, the employee newsletter at the Hershey Medical Center. The researchers selected a sample of 1,000, or roughly one-third of the total employee population. The questionnaire consisted of three main parts. First part measured readers' patterns on a five-point scale, the second part assessed the importance of different reasons for reading the newsletter, and the final section solicited background information on the characteristics of each employee. The survey revealed that overall readership of the newsletter was fairly high, with more than two-thirds (67.6%) reading most or every issue of Vital Signs. The study also revealed that pictures were the most regularly "read" item in Vital Signs (pp. 53-55).

Designing Survey Instruments

In evaluating the effectiveness of publications, several factors can be addressed through a survey (Shoemaker, 1990). These factors include (a) to what degree a publication is read,

(b) if it is read, how readers evaluate the quality of the publication, and (c) whether the readers find the articles related to their interest (pp. 42-44).

A readership survey can be utilized to assess the quality of writing in a publication, the value of the newsletter as an information source, and the identification of potential feature articles.

According to Fisher (1993) the purpose of the readership survey is to obtain a "general idea of what the reader value" (p. 43) about the publication. Fisher believes that mail and telephone surveys are effective survey methods and these methods promote a higher response rate.

Paxson (1992, p. 197) and Stratton and Angerosa (1995, pp. 46-51) suggest that the survey questionnaire should be simple, clear, concise, and easy to complete. A respondent will be comfortable in completing the questionnaire and not consider the task to be time-consuming if the survey appearance is less threatening. In order to make the task appear brief, an attractive layout should be used, the number of questions should be minimized, and repetition be should eliminated. Paxson (1992) and Stratton & Angerosa (1995) also suggest that a stamped self-addressed return envelope be included with the letter and the survey. This helps the respondent in a number of ways. First, it eliminates a minor financial constraint. Second, it saves time and effort on the respondent's part to do this task. Third,

it can be perceived as a benefit or reward by the respondent. Pretesting the cover letter and the questionnaire with a small sample of respondents is also recommended.

A carefully designed follow-up sequence is essential for a good response rate (Faria & Dickinson, 1992, pp. 57-60; Paxson 1992, p. 197; Stratton & Angerosa, 1995, pp. 46-51). Three timed contacts are recommended. Each follow-up differs somewhat from its predecessor since new and stronger appeals are made to persuade a respondent to complete and return the survey.

Summary

The review of literature has provided a framework for conducting a readership survey through a self-administered, mailed questionnaire. The literature review identified several readership surveys conducted by the extension professionals in different states and by other researchers (Suvedi and Johnson, 1992; Suvedi et al., 1993; Smith and Kiernan, 1992; Goetting and Pourroy, 1991; Ludwig, 1988; Nelson and Cudaback, 1985; Frazier, Collins, and Rhodes, 1991; Schumacher, 1989; Piovane, 1995; Pavlik, Vastyan, Mahar, 1990).

The research review also includes few suggestions for designing survey questionnaires (Shoemaker, 1990, pp. 42-44; Fisher, 1993, p. 43; Paxson, 1992, p. 197; Stratton and Angerosa, 1995, pp. 46-51; Faria and Dickinson, 1992, pp. 57-60).

Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES

Methodology

The study employed an evaluation methodology to solicit information from Helping Hand readers regarding their assessment of the publication. The purpose of the study was to evaluate the effectiveness of the newsletter. The objectives of this study were (a) to ascertain readers' use of the Helping Hand, (b) to ascertain readers' opinions of the format, appearance, and content of the Helping Hand, and (c) to identify recipients who no longer wish to receive the newsletter.

Procedures

Eight procedural steps were used to complete this evaluation practicum.

First, a review of literature was conducted. The review included an overview of readership surveys and designing survey instruments.

Second, criteria were established for the evaluation. The criteria were based on the information collected from the literature review and on advice from a county extension agent, an extension specialist, and a research associate from the extension service (see Appendix A).

Third, a data collection instrument was developed. The survey instrument was a two-page questionnaire. A jury of experts was appointed to review the questionnaire to ascertain

face and content validity. The expert panel consisted of a county agent from an adjoining county, a county agent coordinator, and a district agent from the state headquarters (see Appendix B).

Fourth, the questionnaire was field-tested among ten people to assure readability and uniform understanding of survey questions (see Appendix C).

Fifth, the population for this survey consisted of 10% of the 1,000 recipients on the newsletter's mailing list. Through a stratified random sampling process, 65 people were selected from three rural communities and 35 people were selected from one urban community. In this procedure, the entire population on the mailing list was divided into subgroups, on the basis of gender and age. After the population had been divided, samples were drawn randomly from each subgroup.

A cover letter (see Appendix D), questionnaire (see Appendix C), a copy of the newsletter (see Appendix E), and a postage-paid return envelope were mailed to one hundred clientele. The cover letter explained the importance of the survey, guaranteed confidentiality of responses, and appealed for a prompt response. The packet was mailed to the identified sample on August 16, 1995.

Sixth, as following measures, a telephone survey and home visits were conducted to secure a higher response rate.

Seventh, data were analyzed by using descriptive

statistics (i.e., by frequency and percentage of response).

Eighth, a report including conclusions and recommendations was submitted to the administrator of the Tuskegee University Extension Service.

Assumptions

For this practicum, it was assumed that the panel of experts had the knowledge to validate the questionnaire for this survey. It was further assumed that data provided by the 10% of the newsletter recipients would represent the opinions of the total readership.

Limitations

The study was limited to an evaluation of the Helping Hand newsletter in Barbour County, Alabama. The results would not necessarily apply in other settings.

Chapter 4

RESULTS

Three research questions were presented to evaluate the effectiveness of the Helping Hand newsletter.

1. What are the valid and appropriate criteria to evaluate the newsletter?

2. What are the valid and appropriate questions to measure the readers' attitudes, the usefulness of the newsletter, and the suitability of the newsletter contents?

3. What is the valid and appropriate format for the survey?

The initial procedures used to develop the criteria included a review of related literature and advice from three extension service professionals. The second phase of the project included the development of the survey questionnaire and formation of a panel of experts to ascertain the face and content validity of the questionnaire. The third phase involved field-testing the questionnaire to assure the readability and uniform understanding of survey questions. The final phase of this project included mailing the questionnaire to 10% of the 1,000 recipients on the newsletter's mailing list and collecting data.

Review of Related Literature

The review of the related literature partially answered the first research question. The appropriate criteria to evaluate a newsletter were addressed by Paxson (1992, pp. 197), Stratton &

Angerosa (1995, pp. 46-60), Fisher (1990, pp. 42-44), and Shoemaker (1990, pp. 24-26).

The following references were reviewed to answer the second and third research questions.

1. Several readership surveys were studied. Included in this area were readership survey instruments using closed-ended questions (Schumacher, 1989, pp. 131-137; Pavlik, Vastyan, and Mahar, 1990, pp. 53-55; Piovane, 1995, pp. 57-66).

2. A review of several extension newsletter evaluations were included in the literature review (Suvedi and Johnson, 1992, pp. 1-20; Suvedi et al, 1993, pp. 1-12; Smith and Kiernan, 1992, p. 31; Goetting and Pourroy, 1992, pp.17-19; Ludwig, 1988, p.23; Frazier, Collins, and Rhodes, 1991, pp.34-35; Nelson and Cudaback, 1985, pp. 13-14).

3. A meticulous literature review was also conducted to identify and to develop the format of the survey (Paxon, 1992, p.197; Stratton and Angerosa, 1995, pp. 46-51; Faria and Dickinson, 1992, 57-60). This review provided guidelines for the appropriate format of the survey.

Criteria for the Survey

To establish the criteria for the survey, a literature review was conducted on several readership surveys. To establish criteria, the researcher also sought advice from a county extension agent from Barbour County Extension Service, an extension specialist from Tuskegee University, and a research

associate from Tuskegee University (see Appendix A). They were each provided with a summary of the literature review, a sample of a readership survey that was conducted at Michigan State University by Suvedi et al. (1993), and a copy of the handbook on "research and evaluation" by Isaac and Michael (1995).

Selection of Goals

After their review, discussion, and comments, the advisers first decided to establish the following five goals to guide the development of the survey questionnaire:

1. Do clientele read the newsletter, Helping Hand?
2. How important is the information in the Helping Hand to them?
3. How do clientele evaluate the quality of the newsletter?
4. How do clientele evaluate the content and format of the newsletter?
5. How many clientele wish to receive the newsletter?

Selection of Criteria

At the same meeting, the group decided to set the following eight criteria for developing the survey questionnaire:

1. Each question should be related to the research goals.
2. Questions should be relevant.
3. Questions should be clear, concise, and unambiguous.
4. Avoid double-barrelled questions.
5. Respondents must be competent to answer.

6. Avoid negative items or terms.
7. Avoid biased items or terms.

Development of Data Collection Instrument

The questionnaire was developed to meet the goals and the objectives of the study. To develop the questionnaire for the survey, a literature review and a review of several readership surveys were conducted. The questionnaire was designed according to the established criteria.

Draft Survey Questionnaire

The following six questions were developed initially for the survey:

1. How much of an issue of the Helping Hand do you usually read?

   __ All or almost all
   __ At least half
   __ Less than half
   __ Little or none

2. If your copy of the Helping Hand failed to arrive each month, would you:

   __ Miss it
   __ Notice its absence
   __ Be able to function without it
   __ Never know the difference

3. Please rate the Helping Hand in terms of the following statements:

	Always	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Information given in the Helping Hand is useful	__	__	__	__
Information given in the Helping Hand is reliable	__	__	__	__
Information given in the Helping Hand is timely	__	__	__	__

4. Please check your reaction to this statement: The newsletter is easy to understand; unnecessary and difficult words are avoided.

__ Strongly agree
__ Agree
__ Not sure
__ Disagree

5. It costs about $4,488 per year to print 1,000 copies of the Helping Hand for 12 months. Which of the following statements comes closest to expressing the way you feel about this expenditure?

__ The Helping Hand is an excellent way to receive information from extension service. The current cost is within reason.

__ The Helping Hand provides new and reliable information, but the cost is too high.

__ The Helping Hand has outlived its usefulness and should be discontinued.

6. Is a printed newsletter your preferred way to receive the information? Which of the following statements comes closest to your feeling?

__ I prefer to receive a monthly newsletter.

__ I do not wish to receive any newsletter.

__ Please take my name off the mailing list.

Recommendations of the Panel of Experts

A panel of experts was formed to examine the draft questionnaire to ascertain face and content validity. The panel members were selected by the researcher. They included a county agent from Russell County, the county agent coordinator of the Barbour County Extension Service, and the district agent from the Tuskegee University Extension Service. This jury of experts was selected for the formative committee because of their educational

backgrounds, employment status, knowledge, and work experience in the extension service (see Appendix B).

A meeting was held with the panel to establish goals, format, and content of the survey questionnaire. After reviewing the draft questionnaire, the county agent coordinator and the district agent decided to maintain all closed-ended questions because they would be the best method for obtaining data that can be categorized easily (Isaac and Michael, 1995, p. 147). Finally, all of the panel members agreed to reserve questions number one, two, four, and six for the final draft. The panel members also suggested keeping "checklist" items for these questions.

For question number three, the committee suggested using a five point Likert scale to measure each clientele's rating for the newsletter instead of a four point scale. A Likert scale provides great flexibility since the descriptors on the scale vary to fit the nature of the question or statement.

The jury decided to delete question number five from the questionnaire. The question was considered unnecessary. They believed that the question might confuse and discourage respondents from answering the questionnaire.

The final draft survey contained five questions. Question one and two sought to answer the first goal, which was to determine if the clientele read the newsletter. Question three was designed to glean how the clientele evaluates the content and the quality of the newsletter. Question four was selected to learn the format and

readability of the newsletter. Question five was included to identify recipients who no longer wished to receive the Helping Hand newsletter. In addition to reviewing the survey draft, the panel provided twelve guidelines for designing the survey questionnaire:

1. Use two pages to print questions to avoid cluttering.
2. Make instructions brief and easy to understand.
3. Avoid abbreviated items.
4. Use examples if the items may be difficult to understand.
5. Keep the questionnaire as short as possible.
6. Use a logical sequence, and group related items together.
7. Put important items near the beginning of a long questionnaire.
8. Carefully check grammar, spelling, punctuation, and other details.
9. Make sure print is clear and easy to read.
10. Number the pages and the items.
11. Highlight words to emphasize important points.
12. Use an attractive heading

The panel approved the contents of the cover letter, reminding through telephone calls, and follow-up home visits. There were no changes for the cover letter (see Appendix D).

The panel strongly recommended field-testing the questionnaire and the cover letter among ten people to assure readability of the survey questions. The district agent of the

Tuskegee University Extension Service suggested including a few minorities in the field-test. It was also decided by the panel that any returned incomplete questionnaires would be considered invalid.

Selection of Final Questionnaire

The following questions were selected to evaluate the Helping Hand:

1. How much of an issue of the Helping Hand do you usually read?

   __ All or almost all
   __ At least half
   __ Less than half
   __ Little or none

2. If your copy of the Helping Hand failed to arrive each month, would you:

   __ Be unable to function without it
   __ Be disappointed
   __ Notice its absence
   __ Never know the difference

3. Please rate the Helping Hand in terms of the following statements:

	Always	Most of the Time	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Information given in the Helping Hand **is useful**	__	__	__	__	__
Information given in the Helping Hand **is reliable**	__	__	__	__	__
Information given in the Helping Hand **is timely**	__	__	__	__	__

4. Please Check your reaction to this statement: The newsletter is easy to understand: Unnecessary and difficult words are avoided.

__ Strongly agree

__ Agree

__ Not sure

__ Disagree

5. Which of the following statements most accurately represents your opinion?

__ I would prefer to receive the newsletter each month.

__ I would prefer to receive the newsletter once a quarter.

__ I do not wish to receive the newsletter.

Field-test of the Questionnaire and the Cover Letter

Ten people were selected to field-test the cover letter and the questionnaire to assure readability and uniform understanding of survey questions. Six females and four males were selected. Among them, two females and one male were African-American.

All ten people mentioned that the cover letter was easy to understand. Eight people completed the questionnaire in less than five minutes. The other two individuals took about eight minutes to complete it. They all were able to understand the questionnaire without any difficulties.

Response to Data Collection Efforts

Out of one hundred questionnaires mailed, thirty-five responses were returned within the first week. A follow-up telephone call was made after two weeks. Twenty responses were returned after the follow-up telephone call. To secure a higher response rate, fifteen home visits were conducted by the researcher to encourage respondents to return the survey questionnaires. Ten more responses were collected as a result of the home visits. One questionnaire was returned blank. One subject had died since the last update of the mailing list. Two clients declined to respond to the survey because of time constraints.

Responses to Questionnaire Items

A total of 61 usable questionnaires were received for analysis. Data were analyzed using the Microsoft Works for Windows.

The Amount of the Helping Hand that Readers Normally Read

Figure 1. Response to Item 1.

Ninety-five percent of all respondents indicated that they read all or almost all of the articles in the publication. Five percent indicated reading at least half.

The respondents were asked to express their reaction if the newsletter failed to arrive each month

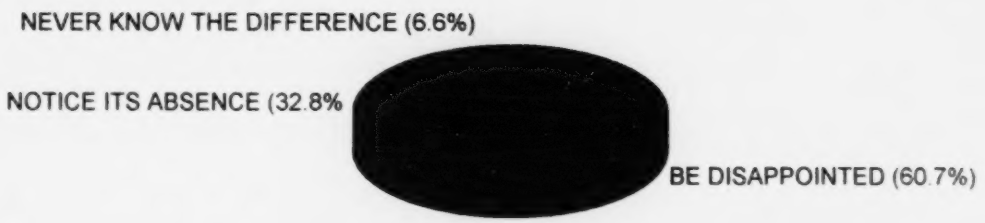

Figure 2. Responses to Item 2.

Sixty-one percent of the respondents indicated that they miss their copy of the Helping Hand if it fails to arrive each month. Thirty-three percent would notice its absence, and the rest, seven percent, would never know the difference.

Respondents were asked to rate the Helping Hand in terms of its usefulness, reliability, and timeliness of information.

Readers'Rating Regarding the Usefulness of the Newsletter

Figure 3.01. Responses to item 3.01.

Fifty-one percent indicated that they always found the information given in the Helping Hand useful. Sixteen percent found the information useful almost all the time, thirty percent found the information useful sometimes, and three percent found the information rarely useful.

Readers' Rating Regarding the reliability of the Newsletter

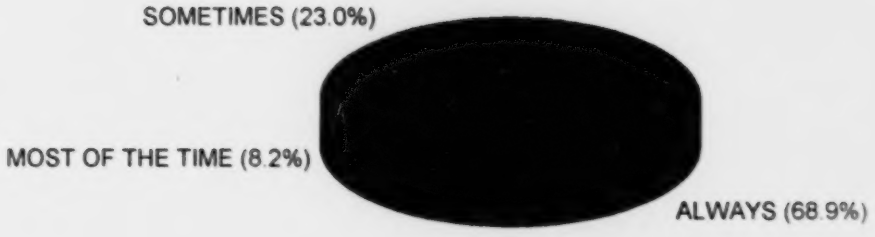

Figure 3.02. Responses to item 3.02.

Sixty-nine percent of respondents indicated that the information given in the Helping Hand was always reliable. Eight percent found the information reliable most of the time, and twenty-three percent found the information reliable sometimes.

Readers' rating Regarding the timeliness of the Newsletter

Figure 3.03. Responses to Item 3.03.

Seventy-five percent of respondents indicated that the information given in the Helping Hand was timely. Seven percent found the information timely most of the time, and eighteen percent found the information timely sometimes.

Respondents were asked to comment on the format and content of the Helping Hand

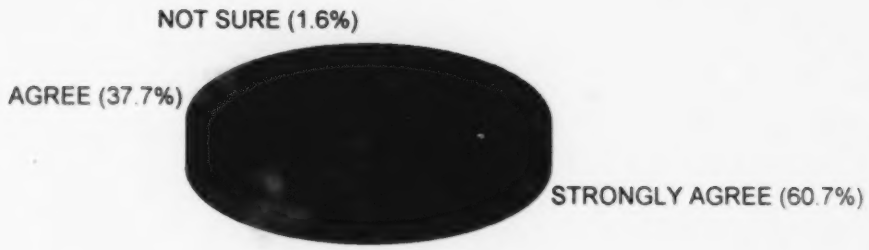

Figure 4. Responses to Item 4.

Sixty-one percent of the respondents strongly agreed that the newsletter was easy to understand and that unnecessary and difficult words were avoided. Thirty-eight percent agreed, and one percent were not sure.

Respondents were asked to specify how they felt about the frequency of the Helping Hand

Figure 5. Responses to Item 5.

Eighty percent of respondents indicated that they would prefer to receive the newsletter each month. Fourteen percent of respondents preferred to receive the newsletter once a quarter, and five percent of respondents did not wish to receive the newsletter.

Comments

A few respondents wrote a comment on the survey sheet, even though the questionnaire did not include any open-ended questions.

1. "Good survey, thank you."

2. "Keep us informed."

3. "Thanks for sending Helping Hand in the past. I have enjoyed it very much, but since I have retired I do less cooking, etc."

4. "I think it has served its purposes."

5. "Close it down as a budget cut. It has no value."

6. "Helping Hand is an average newsle
tter. I would make it an excellent newsletter or a dropout."

7. "Under present budget and time constrains, I would eliminate it."

8. " Due to eye problems I'm unable to read much. Thanks for sending your newsletter during last several years."

9. "If my copy of the newsletter failed to arrive I will notice its absence, maybe not the first time but eventually I would wonder what happened to it."

Chapter 5

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of the Helping Hand newsletter.

The objectives of this study were to ascertain readers' utilization of the publication and their perceptions about the format, appearance, and usefulness of the newsletter.

The first research question asked: What are the valid and appropriate criteria to evaluate the newsletter?

The criteria for the evaluation were established by reviewing the related literature (Fisher, 1990, p. 43; Shoemaker, 1990, pp. 42-44; and by consulting with three extension professionals. The criteria were validated by a panel of three other experts.

The second research question asked: What are the valid and appropriate questions to measure the readers' attitudes, the usefulness of the newsletter, and the suitability of the newsletter contents?

The questionnaire developed for the evaluation of the Helping Hand was derived from literature related to various readership surveys. The literature review was divided into two broad areas. Those were: (a) readership survey and (b) designing survey instruments. The literature review included

several readership surveys conducted by the extension service, such as a readership survey of the Communicator by Suvedi and Johnson (1992), evaluation of an Interactive Newsletter by Goetting and Pourroy (1991), evaluation of the Woodlander by Smith and Kiernan (1992), and a readership survey of the Messenger by Suvedi et al. (1993). The literature review also included a readership survey of the alumni publication The Tower by Piovane (1995), evaluation of Doane's Agricultural Newsletter by Schumacher (1989), and a readership survey of Vital Signs by Pavlik, Vastyan, and Mahar (1990).

A panel of experts provided guidelines to establish the content and format of the survey questionnaire.

The third question asked: What is the valid and appropriate format for the survey?

The panel of experts guided the selection of content and format for the survey questionnaire. Suggestions were also taken from the literature review (Paxson, 1992; Stratton and Angerosa, 1995; Faria and Dickinson, 1992). The questionnaires were field-tested to assure readability and uniform understanding.

The survey questionnaires were sent along with a current issue of the newsletter to a stratified random sample of 10% of the 1,000 recipients of the newsletter.

Sixty-one percent of those subscribers responded to the questionnaire in the mail. The data were analyzed by using descriptive statistics.

The results of the newsletter evaluation provided unambiguous information for decisions about the newsletter's future. A substantial majority of the respondents indicated that they usually read the entire newsletter and virtually all of the respondents, found the newsletter easy to understand.

Objectives of all eight procedures were successfully met. The newsletter was evaluated. This study was the first readership survey ever conducted to assess the effectiveness of the newsletter. This survey provided information that was not available before.

The usefulness and the effectiveness of a publication greatly depend on how it meets and reflects the interests of its readers. A readership survey, therefore, is a valuable tool in analyzing reader opinion. Findings of the survey showed that the publication was needed and valued by the extension clients. The study also showed a satisfactory rating of the Helping Hand by the readers.

A newsletter that was read and used could be an effective method of disseminating information; however, a newsletter that was not read would be too costly for the extension service to continue. The findings of this study would assist Barbour County Extension Service in reaching decisions on future directions of the newsletter.

A report including conclusions and recommendations was

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A report including conclusions and recommendations was submitted to the Administrator of the Tuskegee University Extension Service.

Conclusions

This study was conducted to get feedback on the Helping Hand, a monthly newsletter of the Barbour County Extension Service. The objectives of this study were to ascertain readers' utilization of the publication and their perceptions about the format and content of the newsletter.

The study shows that a majority of the respondents read all or almost all of the articles in the publication. The majority of the readers would notice its absence if they miss an issue. The publication was perceived by the readers as very useful, timely, and reliable. The respondents read the newsletter and shared it with friends and neighbors.

The Helping Hand newsletter is an effective method of meeting the needs of many individuals who do not have time to take courses or read books, yet they find time to read magazines, newspapers, and newsletters.

Implications

The conclusions of the survey have serious implications for decisions about the future of the Helping Hand newsletter. The results of the study show that a majority of the survey respondents prefer to receive a monthly printed newsletter. Informational newsletters can be an effective and cost-efficient

method of disseminating information. The expenditure in publishing the Helping Hand is justifiable mainly because the publication is serving its purpose, and, therefore, current costs are within reason. It seems that the purpose of the Helping Hand is being met, and that it is doing the job for which it was created.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

1. Barbour County Extension Service should continue publishing the Helping Hand. The Helping Hand has served as an important information resource to its readers, who could not attend extension programs. The current cost is within reason.

2. Conduct a follow-up survey.

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APPENDIXES

Appendix A

Criteria of the Survey

To establish the criteria for the survey, a literature review was conducted on several readership surveys. The researcher sought advice for establishing criteria from Mr. Charlie Mason, a county agent; Dr. Barbara Diffaey, an extension specialist; and Dr. Robert Zabawa, a Research Associate from Tuskegee University Extension Service. They were each provided with a summary of the literature review, a sample of a readership survey that was conducted at Michigan State University by Suvedi et al. (1993), and a copy of the handbook on "Research and Evaluation" by Issac and Michael, 1995.

After their review and comments, the following criteria were established for the survey:

1. Each Question should be related to the research goals.
2. Questions should be relevant.
3. Questions should be clear, concise, and unambiguous.
4. Avoid double-barrelled questions.
5. Respondents must be competent to answer.
6. Avoid negative items or terms.
7. Avoid biased items or terms.

Appendix B

The Formative Committee

A committee was formed to examine the draft questionnaire to ascertain face and content validity. The committee members were selected by the researcher. They included Mrs. Tarana Kahn, a county agent from Russell County Extension Service (adjoining County); Mr. James McGhee, the county agent coordinator of the Barbour County Extension Service; and Dr. Sharon Anderson, the district agent of the Tuskegee University Extension Service.

Mrs. Tarana Kahn has been working as a county agent since 1990. Mrs. Kahn received a master's degree in Foods and Nutrition from Tuskegee University. She has a monthly newsletter that reaches about 1500 people. She has published several publications in the area of Foods and Nutrition.

Mr. James McGhee is the county agent coordinator of the Barbour County Extension Service. Mr. McGhee has been serving as a county agent coordinator since 1978. Mr. McGhee supervises four different newsletters every month that reaches approximately 6000 people in Barbour County. He holds a master's degree in Agriculture.

Dr. Sharon Anderson is the district agent of the Tuskegee University Extension Service. She has been appointed as a district agent since 1993. She received her doctorate degree from the Michigan State University in Adult Education. She has several publications in adult education.

These three professionals were selected for the formative committee because of their educational backgrounds and work experience.

The committee met once, and a design model was developed for the format and the contents of the questionnaire.

The following are the format and the final questions for the survey that was recommended by the formative committee.

1. Use two pages to print questions to avoid cluttering.
2. Make instructions brief and easy to understand.
3. Avoid abbreviated items.
4. Use examples if the items may be difficult to understand.
5. Keep the questions as short as possible.
6. Use a logical sequence, and group related items together.
7. Put important items near the beginning of a long question.
8. Carefully check grammar, spelling, punctuation, and other details.
9. Make sure printing are clear and easy to read.
10. Number the pages and items.
11. Highlight words to emphasize important points.
12. Use an attractive heading.

Appendix C

QUESTIONNAIRE

Please respond to the following questions. Check only **one answer** for each question:

1. How much of an issue of the Helping Hand do you usually read?

___ All or almost all
___ At least half
___ Less than half
___ Little or none

2. If your copy of the Helping Hand failed to arrive each month, would you:

___ Be unable to function without it
___ Notice its absence
___ Never know the difference

3. Please rate the Helping Hand in terms of the following statements:

	Always	Most of the Time	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Information given in the Helping Hand is **useful**	___	___	___	___	___
Information given in the Helping Hand is **reliable**	___	___	___	___	___
Information given in the Helping Hand is **timely**	___	___	___	___	___

4. Please check your reaction to this statement: The newsletter is easy to understand: unnecessary and difficult words are avoided.

___ Strongly agree
___ Agree
___ Not sure
___ Disagree

5. Which of the following statements most accurately represents your opinion?

___ I would prefer to receive the newsletter each month.
___ I would prefer to receive the newsletter once a quarter.
___ I do not wish to receive the newsletter.

THANK YOU!

Appendix D

July 13, 1995

Barbour County Extension Office
Post Office Box 99
Clayton, Alabama 36016
Telephone: (334) 775-3285

Dear Friend:

It has been about ten years since we started to publish the newsletter Helping Hand. Since then we never had a chance to evaluate the newsletter. In order to obtain your opinion and overall attitude regarding the usefulness and content of the Helping Hand, we are conducting a readership survey, and we would like to have your input.

We need your opinion to assure that the study represents the views of all readers. We hope you will choose to participate in this study. Your name will be confidencial, and the information that you provide will be used only in combination with other responses.

Thanks in advance for taking a few minutes to fill out the survey form. Please return it in the enclosed pre-addressed, stamped envelope to: Habiba N. Shaw, County Agent, Barbour County Extension Service, P.O. Box 99, Clayton, Alabama 36016.

As a token of our appreciation for your help, we are enclosing a copy of the latest edition of the Helping Hand.

Sincerely,

Habiba N. Shaw

Habiba N. Shaw
County Agent

Appendix E

COOPERATIVE EXTENSION PROGRAM

TUSKEGEE UNIVERSITY

Tuskegee University, Alabama A & M, Auburn University
and U. S. Department of Agriculture cooperating

Barbour County Extension Office
Post Office Box 99
Clayton, Alabama 36016

Telephone: (334) 775-3285

"HELPING HAND"

HOMEMAKERS' NEWSLETTER BARBOUR/BULLOCK COUNTY AUGUST/SEPTEMBER, 1995

"KEEP IT LOW-FAT"

BAKING: Preheat oven to 450°F. To keep fish moist, bake it in a small amount of liquid — low-fat milk, seasoned water, broth or wine. Seal in moisture with a light bread or cracker crumb topping.

BROILING OR GRILLING: Try a light coating of non-fat mayonnaise or low-fat yogurt with herbs. You can also baste with barbecue sauce or a mixture consisting of lemon or lime juice, herbs and a small amount of olive oil.

Keep It Low-Fat
Seafood loses its place in a low-fat diet when it's laden with rich, creamy sauces or dipped in butter. Refer to for a run-down of cooking methods that keep fish and shellfish naturally low-fat.

POACHING: For oven poaching, place fish in a baking dish and barely cover it with any combination of the following: milk, wine and water, seasoned and salted water, or chicken or fish stock with vegetables. Lay a sheet of foil across the top of the dish and bake in preheated 400°F oven.

STEAMING: You can steam over plain boiling water or any of the broths listed for poaching. If you don't have a fish steamer, you can devise one by taking a large pan with a roasting rack that holds fish above — not in — the boiling water.

The Tuskegee University Cooperative Extension Program offers its programs to persons regardless of race, color, national origin, sex or handicap and is an equal opportunity employer.

(over)

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MICROWAVE COOKING: It is best to check your oven's manual for seafood guidelines. In general, microwave cooking times are 1/4 to 1/3 of those used for conventional recipes.

"FILLING UP ON FIBER"

Dietary fiber, often called roughage, is the part of whole grains, vegetables, fruits, beans, nuts, and seeds that we can't digest. There are two types of fiber, insoluble and soluble. Both types of fiber are important for a healthy diet. The National Cancer Institute recommends between 20 to 30 grams of fiber a day, with an upper limit of 35 grams, from a variety of sources like bran cereal, whole grain breads, vegetables, and fruits.

"DIFFERENCE BETWEEN OAT BRAN AND OATMEAL"

A whole grain is made up of the bran, the germ and the endosperm. Oatmeal, a whole grain, contains all these layers, while oat bran consists of only the bran layer of the grain. Both oatmeal and oat bran are good choices nutritionally. Oat bran has about two times as much soluble fiber as oatmeal. The vitamin and mineral content of oat bran may be slightly higher than oatmeal, but you can't go wrong with either choice. Below are two delicious recipes:

Soda Bread: 1-1/2 cups whole wheat flour
1 cup all purpose flour
1/2 cup rolled oats
1/4 cup sugar
1/2 teaspoon baking soda
1-1/2 teaspoons baking powder
1/4 teaspoon ground cinnamon
1/3 cup raisins (optional)
1/4 cup walnuts (optional)
1-1/4 cups low-fat buttermilk
1 tablespoon vegetable oil

Preheat oven to 375°. In large bowl, stir together flours, oats, sugar, baking soda, baking powder and cinnamon. If adding raisins and walnuts, mix in. Gradually stir in buttermilk and oil until forms ball. Knead in bowl for 30 seconds. Spray loaf pan with cooking spray and turn dough into pan. Bake 40 to 50 minutes until knife inserted in middle comes out clean. Makes 16 slices and has 126 calories per serving. Nutrition Content: 23 g carbohydrate, 3 g fat, 4 g protein, 2 g dietary fiber, 78 mg sodium, 1 mg cholesterol.

Cantaloupe Strawberry Shake: 1 cup whole strawberries
1 cup cantaloupe
2 teaspoons sugar
1/2 cup skim milk

Cut fruit in big chunks. Add to food processor with sugar and milk, and blend until frothy. Serve immediately. Serves 2. 89 calories per serving. Nutrition Content: 19 g carbohydrate, 1 g fat, 3 g protein, 3 g dietary fiber, 40 mg sodium, 1 mg cholesterol.

Sincerely,

Habiba N. Shaw

Habiba N. Shaw
County Agent

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